



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Combating Racism and Discrimination Against Roma/Sinti

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes
to the Cordoba Conference on Anti-Semitism
and on Other Forms of Intolerance
June 9, 2005

Thank you, Madam Moderator.

Racism, intolerance, and discrimination against Roma and Sinti in the OSCE region are among the most pernicious, complicated, and deeply rooted problems in the OSCE region. Yet these are also problems that are all too often overlooked, and for which excuses are too often made.

For example, last December, a Member of the Bulgarian Parliament brushed off allegations that a Bulgarian Mayor had trafficked Roma girls for sexual exploitation. The parliamentarian claimed that the trafficking and statutory rape of these girls should not be considered a crime because, he claimed, Roma girls are “mature” at age 14. This statement was absolutely unacceptable, and should be condemned by other members of the Bulgarian Parliament and Government.

Indeed, it is despicable when leaders – government officials and members of civil society – excuse discrimination and even violence against Roma and Sinti because of their supposed “intractable differences” from other groups in society. Roma and Sinti are no different from any other human beings.

There is no excuse for a pogrom that expelled 400 people from their homes, such as the one that occurred in the Siberian village of Iskitim (ISS-ki-tim) this February. Public leaders have a responsibility to speak out vocally against racist attacks like this one. When public leaders remain silent, it sends a shameful and unacceptable signal to society. It goes without saying that hate crimes against Roma must also be investigated and prosecuted.

I am deeply saddened every time I read articles on the education of Roma in some OSCE states. It is despicable that Roma children are so often forced to study in segregated schools with sub-standard facilities, and often offered classes geared towards the mentally disabled.

Skin color, language, cultural differences, and poverty are not mental disabilities. Roma children deserve the same education as all other children. Education, in turn, will improve their language skills and economic opportunities.

I am heartened by non-governmental projects in some countries, such as Bulgaria, that aim to prove that fact, which should be self-evident, and to de-segregate local educational systems. Desegregation now needs to happen on a national scale, and with the involvement of national governments in every country in the OSCE region.

Children must have the chance to meet Roma children in their own schools, and to learn from a young age that Roma are the same as anyone else, with the same interests, the same ability to learn, and the same hopes and fears for the world. If this happens, they will be less likely as adults to make the excuses that many make today for intolerance and discrimination against Roma.

Teaching tolerance to young children in a multicultural school environment is the first step towards implementing all the points in the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area. Holocaust education – and recognition and remembrance of the Roma victims of the Holocaust – is also an important step.

In this regard the United States commends the fact that Czech Prime Minister Paroubek (PAR-oo-bek) called last month for the removal of a pig farm from the grounds of a former Nazi concentration camp for Roma in the town of Lety.

Finally, I would like to stress that States and NGOs must pay particular attention to the disgraceful practice of appealing to intolerance against Roma as part of a political campaign.

In a positive development just two weeks ago, two of the ruling Bulgarian political parties signed a declaration promising that, in the upcoming election campaign, “the parties, their candidates, and their members will publicly condemn every use of propaganda and language that could harm or insult anybody because of his or her ethnic origin or could lead to contention among the different ethnic groups that constitute the Bulgarian nation.”

I hope that all the other parties in Bulgaria will sign this declaration, and that it will serve as an example to the parties in other OSCE states.

In closing, Madam Moderator, I want to express my appreciation to Nicolae Gheorghe, who played an instrumental role in getting the first reference to Roma in an international human rights document – the 1990 Copenhagen Document. He has testified twice before the U.S. Congress on these issues – once as a non-governmental representative and more recently as a staff member of ODIHR. We are privileged to work with him and I want to take this opportunity to recognize his unfailing dedication to improving the situation of Roma throughout the 55 OSCE participating States.

Thank you.